

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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## **Participatory and beneficiary-based approaches to the evaluation of humanitarian programmes**

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## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to assess the extent to which refugee and humanitarian agencies have used participatory and beneficiary based methodologies in their evaluation processes. A review of numerous guidelines for evaluation and analyses of best practice in the humanitarian field demonstrate that there is increasing interest in the use of such methodologies amongst donors, UN and other international organizations and NGOs. A review of recent evaluation reports and consultations with evaluators and agency employees, however, suggests that the best practice which is proposed by numerous evaluation guidelines and handbooks has not yet become common practice.

## **Humanitarian evaluations**

Following moves in the field of development, humanitarian actors are beginning to recognize that assessing the impact of their work has more validity on a number of counts than the more limited aim of measuring output in material terms. This is linked to a recognition that current evaluation practices do not always provide information which is useful to practitioners, and that the way in which evaluations are conducted determines the kind of information gathered. The inference is that changing evaluation processes to incorporate beneficiary perspectives more fully, cannot and should not be done in isolation from re-conceiving evaluation objectives more broadly.

As developmental approaches to emergency and relief management have taken hold, it is also the case that some of the aspirations of the developmental actors relating to stakeholder participation and downward accountability have become more pressing in the humanitarian arena also. This is visible in the new emphasis on standards, including initiatives such as the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in disaster relief, the Sphere Project, the Humanitarian Ombudsman project and the work of the ALNAP network. (Dabelstein and O' Keefe 2000)

Much of the literature on participatory evaluation work relates first and foremost to developmental contexts, and while much of it can be exported to provide lessons for the humanitarian framework, there are clearly points of divergence.

Evaluating emergency humanitarian aid which is being provided in uncertain, turbulent and insecure environments obviously presents challenges beyond those encountered in the evaluation of structural development aid. (AusAID 1998: 5)

In what ways do evaluations of humanitarian assistance and developmental programmes necessarily differ? To what extent can the same methodologies be used in evaluation for development and relief programmes? Implicit in these questions is another. Can the participatory approaches which are entering the mainstream of developmental work, particularly in relation to innovative strategies of impact assessment, be applied to the humanitarian arena? According to the OECD:

In terms of 'good practice', there are many ways in which the evaluation of humanitarian assistance programmes in complex emergencies is little

different to the evaluation of aid programmes in general: terms of reference need to be prepared, teams selected, field study undertaken and reports and recommendations prepared. However, the very characteristics of complex emergencies and the way in which international assistance is organized and provided requires the explicit consideration of, and in many instances an emphasis upon, approaches to evaluation which are not typical of those used in relation to development projects and programmes. (OECD 1999: 10)

It may be that the difference asserted by the OECD rests on a presumption that humanitarian assistance programming cannot be, as developmental work can be, predicated on the systematic involvement of the beneficiary population throughout. On the other hand, it is clear, as the OECD again points out, that there are additional complications for any kind of analysis in emergency situations:

Whilst humanitarian assistance evaluations to date have been patchy in their coverage of such issues, it is now widely recognized that future evaluations need to assess the 'humanitarian space', the security situation and the protection needs of the affected population. These are substantially different concerns from those of 'conventional' aid evaluations. (OECD 1999: 11)

Some of the challenges faced by evaluators of humanitarian aid in particular, relate to the conventional modes of delivery of humanitarian assistance. Organizations like UNHCR are almost necessarily centralized and bureaucratic; a function of the political and economic framework within which they are obliged to operate, as well as their organizational culture. This has implications for the way in which aid is administered, notably for the extent to which beneficiary populations and others are invited to participate in the planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of assistance programming. The recent literature suggests that deficiencies in this area will not go unnoticed in the future. As Alistair Hallam notes in one of the most influential new publications on the subject, *Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance Programmes in Complex Emergencies* (1998):

Humanitarian assistance is essentially a 'top down' process. Humanitarian agencies are often poor at consulting or involving members of the affected population and beneficiaries of their assistance. Consequently, there can be considerable discrepancy between the agency's perception of its performance and the perceptions of the affected population and beneficiaries. Experience shows that interviews with beneficiaries can be one of the richest sources of information in evaluations of humanitarian assistance. Interviews with a sample of the affected population should be a mandatory part of any humanitarian assistance evaluation. (Hallam 1998: 13)

The objectives of humanitarian evaluations have, until now, related predominantly to institutional priorities. The notion that beneficiaries might have a role as anything other than recipients of improved assistance, albeit a laudable intention in itself, has rarely figured. The idea that there might be value in the process itself for beneficiary populations has been outside the parameters of concern. Institutional objectives are generally understood to be grouped around lesson learning and accountability. (Estrella and Gaventa 1999: 6, Hallam 1998: 44, DANIDA 1999: 1.3, DAC/OECD 1991: 2.6, UNHCR 1998e: Part 2, SIDA 1999: 1) Accountability has usually been conceived as

upwards; to donors, trustees and other northern stakeholders. Recently, the need for downward accountability has also been raised. (Hallam 1998: 75)

In contrast to financial accountability mechanisms which are now comparatively well developed within agencies and between the implementing agencies and donor organizations the mechanisms for ensuring accountability to the population being served are poorly developed. (Borton 1995: 1)

It is not clear that the objective of downward accountability is achievable without more attention being paid to beneficiary views at every stage of programme management. In *Planning and Organising Useful Evaluations*, UNHCR appears to take the emphasis off accountability as an objective, a move which risks missing the opportunity to engage with the ‘downward accountability’ advocated by Hallam above.

UNHCR evaluations can serve many purposes. The principal aim is to provide analyses and proposals regarding issues and concerns the organization is attempting to address. In most cases, evaluations are intended to serve as a catalyst for change by furthering understanding and assisting decision-making. Hence, evaluations often take on both a learning and trouble-shooting character... Although evaluations are sometimes intended as a means of providing analytical information on results that can be used for control or accountability, they are generally much less successful in this role. (UNHCR 1998d: paras. 4-5)

There is also, of course, a relationship between the kind of information sought in an evaluation, and the methods used to gather it. This has implications for the extent to which, and the way in which participatory or beneficiary based methods are used. According to the OECD,

If lesson-learning is emphasized then it opens up the possibility for the extensive use of participatory methods. If accountability is emphasized then it implies structuring the evaluation so that its findings are independent and respected. (OECD 1999: 17)

This position indicates a common mistrust of the results of participatory research and assumes that the objectives of an evaluation relate predominantly to the learning of a single truth. The extent to which this is helpful will be discussed later in this paper.

‘Traditional’ or conventional evaluations have, in the past, tended to employ a technical idiom which relies on establishing the extent to which fixed objectives have been achieved by implementers. A ‘scientific’ approach has been common, with evaluation teams mandated to investigate outputs in terms of resources controlled by the programme. Quantitative methods have generally been employed to do this, and have been preferred by donors and organizations’ head quarters on the grounds of their assumed reliability and verifiability. This approach implies the desirability and possibility of establishing the ‘facts’ and the ‘truth’ of the matter in objective terms (see Table 1 below). The extent to which this has been useful is variable. Borrowing from developmental strategies and evaluation criteria, a new emphasis has been placed in some quarters on the assessment of impact of programmes. This implies a much more wide ranging and inclusive focus and may represent the best forum for methodological

innovations including the increased participation of beneficiaries and others in evaluation processes.

Traditional evaluation tends to see the people involved in a project as objects of an evaluation: alternative approaches take the view that participants in development projects should be the 'subjects' of evaluation and take a more active role. The methods chosen should enhance their capacity to collect and analyze information relevant to them and their situation. (Rubin 1995: 22)

Any move which seeks to involve beneficiaries in research will have to address the way that programme staff feels about evaluations. There will be a need to re-define evaluation processes as collaborative and constructive rather than intimidating and judgmental for programme and project staff. Their concerns about what evaluation results might mean for their work or their own careers may make them reluctant to relinquish the control they have in decision making.

Such concerns are often referred to in the literature, the implication is usually that they are ill founded. But in a sense, staff may be right to be worried; 'Evaluation research is a purposeful activity, undertaken to affect policy development, to shape the design and implementation of social interventions, and to improve the management of social programs. In the broadest sense of politics, evaluation is a political activity'. (Rossi 1993: 403; see also Guba and Yvonne 1989) Evaluations have been used to cut funding and as a judgmental tool. In recognition of the destructive consequences of realistic fears about the consequences of becoming involved in any kind of evaluation, organizations such as MSF Holland are explicitly attempting to re-orient evaluation to place a greater emphasis on learning in a move away from the system of internal accountability it has represented within the NGO. (comment by Peter Giesen at ALNAP meeting 6.4.00)

Many of the points touched on above relate to the purpose of evaluation processes in diverse fields. Each has implications for the extent that beneficiaries are invited to participate, and are related to the extent to which pre-evaluation work has been participatory. Some will be addressed in more detail later. Here it suffices to emphasize that any discussion of this subject must recognize that evaluation is a political process which means different things to different actors. Involving beneficiaries in the evaluation of humanitarian assistance programmes implies that the evaluation objectives are wider than a straightforward attempt to measure programme outputs.

**Table 1. Differences between conventional and participatory evaluations**

	<b>Conventional</b>	<b>Participatory</b>
<b>Who</b>	External experts	Community members, project staff, facilitator
<b>What</b>	Predetermined indicators of success, principally cost and production outputs	People identify own indicators of success, which may include production outputs
<b>How</b>	Focus on ‘scientific objectivity’, distancing of evaluators from other participants; uniform, complex procedures; delayed, limited access to results.	Self evaluation; simple methods adapted to local culture, open, immediate sharing of results through local involvement in evaluation process.
<b>When</b>	Usually upon completion of project or programme; sometimes also mid-term.	More frequent, small scale evaluations
<b>Why</b>	Accountability, usually summative, to determine if funding continues	To empower local people to initiate, control and take corrective action.

*Source: Narayan-Parker, D 1993:12 Reproduced in Estrella and Gaventa, 1999.*

This can only be a good thing. Analysis of the socio-political economy inhabited by refugees or others affected by complex emergencies is a pre-requisite for a meaningful evaluation of programmes designed to assist them. Further analysis of the survival strategies employed by such populations in conjunction with assessment of formal assistance provision are the logical next step. Thus, a point is quickly reached at which evaluation of programmes designed to assist affected populations but conducted without their input can be seen to be counter productive. If it is accepted that assessment of the impact of programmes, with all that implies, is desirable, beneficiaries must be involved in the process. Attempts to incorporate beneficiary voices have been found to be frustrating when they operate within a framework which does not accept this. As anthropologist and evaluator on the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, Johann Pottier, asks:

How can I make them move beyond what they expect me to do, which is to have nice neat (apolitical) questions and bring back neat (apolitical) answers? The methodological challenge ... is not how we can use shortcuts in research (e.g. by applying PRA techniques) but how we can improve on the questions we ask in the highly charged setting of complex political emergencies ... Sitting down for as long as it takes, and knowing what questions to ask and how, must remain the principal strategy. (Pottier 1995: 124)

It will be gathered from the brief discussion above, that considering ways to ‘add on’ a beneficiary perspective to existing evaluation strategies will be insufficient. Fortunately, models already exist for developmental work, which it might be possible to adapt for the humanitarian context. In a survey of cases and key literature on Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E), Estrella and Gaventa identify five general functions which offer a glimpse of the potential scope of the approach. These are impact assessment, project management and planning, organizational strengthening or institutional learning, understanding and negotiating stakeholder perspectives and public accountability. (1999: 6) In this re-conception, beneficiary based methods are brought in from the margins to occupy a central position in efforts to generate useful and relevant

learning. In the following section I review some of the imperatives contained in a range of guidelines and other documents on this subject.

### **Prescriptions for action: guidelines and manuals**

The guidelines and manuals on organizing evaluations of humanitarian assistance produced by a range of international organizations, donors and NGOs send a clear message about their recognition of the need for more participatory evaluation processes than have existed in the past. As Apthorpe notes,

A requirement to consult with the victims of emergencies while serving them, in order to serve them better, is included in all the current codes of conduct and prescriptions for humanitarian action. (Apthorpe 1999: 2)

The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in disaster relief states that 'Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid' (reproduced in OECD 1999: 20) This is taken to include evaluation processes and echoes the widespread concern with beneficiary involvement elsewhere. The commitment to inclusive and participatory approaches which has been visible in the developmental world since at least the early 1990s has made the cross over on paper at least, to the humanitarian sphere. 'Experience shows that interviews with beneficiaries can be one of the richest sources of information in evaluations of humanitarian assistance.' (OECD 1999: 25)

In introducing UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR undertakes that,

EPAU will make particular efforts to work in collaboration with its operational partners and to ensure that beneficiary views are taken into account in the analysis and assessment of UNHCR activities.

Similarly, UNHCR's mission statement states that 'UNHCR is committed to the principle of participation by consulting refugees on decisions that affect their lives.' Other United Nations agencies concur;

Involving beneficiaries in evaluation is essential, though often neglected. A repeated finding of evaluations of development assistance is that programmes in which beneficiaries do not have a voice are likely to fail. (OECD 1988) Beneficiaries should be involved in project selection, design, implementation and evaluation if their participation is to be effective and their voices heard.... Participatory evaluation goes further. Not only does it encourage beneficiaries to voice their views or gather information; it also entails assisting community members to analyze data themselves and plan actions to improve their situation. (UNICEF 2000)

Similarly in *Who are the Question-Makers: a Participatory Evaluation Handbook*, the UNDP not only recommends participatory evaluation processes but also sanctions the changes to the evaluation system they entail:

Participatory evaluation ... involves the stakeholders and beneficiaries of a programme or project in the collective examination and assessment of that programme or project. It is people centred: project stakeholders and beneficiaries are the key actors of the evaluation process and not the mere objects of the evaluation.

And,

In a participatory evaluation, the role and purpose of the evaluation change dramatically. Such an evaluation places as much (if not more) emphasis on the process as on the final output, i.e., the report. The purpose of the evaluation is not only to fulfil a bureaucratic requirement but also to develop the capacity of stakeholders to assess their environment and take action. (UNDP 1997)

Both DANIDA and DFID, two important donors, are moving towards participatory evaluation. The latter is in the process of producing new evaluation guidelines (interview, Acting Head of Evaluation Dept., 31.3.00) and DFID is also beginning a survey of the status of participatory work within the organization. DANIDA acknowledges the need to recognize the competing interest groups represented by actors and describes the role of the stakeholders thus:

The stakeholders are those individuals or organizations that informally have an interest in the policy or programme being evaluated and the findings of the evaluation. Stakeholders may sometimes be the same as users. In order to ensure usefulness of evaluations, the views and expertise of groups affected ought to be considered and integrated whenever appropriate. Stakeholders can for instance be involved through steering or advisory groups. Participatory evaluation methods can be used to create consensus and ownership in relation to the development activities. Dialogue with stakeholders can help improve understanding and responsiveness to their needs and priorities. Feedback to both users and stakeholders is essential to make evaluations useful. (DANIDA 1999: chap 1.6)

In a *1995 Outline Report on Gender in WFP Emergency and Protracted Operations Programmes* (1995), the WFP advocates consultation with women's groups by female staff, and the replacement of annual food supply assessment missions with community based assessment and monitoring systems involving local people collecting data. This last is rarely seen in any of the guidelines, and if genuine, implies a willingness to go relatively far with participatory approaches. CARE, similarly, describe the evaluation as 'a collaborative effort among all stakeholder groups' (CARE 1994) and indicate a willingness to share responsibility and power, 'the core evaluation team will facilitate a process through which stakeholders assess the successes and failures of the project and determine future actions.' (CARE 1994: 1)

This apparent willingness to hand some of the decision making and data collection functions involved in evaluation over to affected populations, dovetails with two other themes in this literature. Firstly, it implies recognition of the fact that field practice should be evaluated with reference to the policies which have generated it. Secondly, and as indicated in the first part of this paper, it points towards a greater use of impact

assessment techniques by asserting the desirability of collaboration with the beneficiaries. There is a circular relationship between the research to be conducted, and the way in which it is done. Thus,

In humanitarian assistance situations, the fluidity of the context and the complexity and inter relatedness of the response system reduces (though by no means eliminates) the value and effectiveness of project evaluation techniques which require the separation of cause and effect. Explanation based on the separation of cause from effect is often not possible in complex systems composed of numerous interdependent relationships where the direction of influence may well be circular rather than linear. Thus methods which are more common in historical or philosophical research are often more productive than those traditionally employed in the social sciences. (OECD 1999: 12)

These new methods are more appropriate for the wider assessment of impact and situation analysis which is desired by the guidelines, as the OECD report continues:

Such methods acknowledge the complexity and interdependent nature of events in the real world and ask not, ‘did x cause y?’ but rather, ‘what happened?’ and ‘why?’ In other words, in order to understand and be able to deal with situations and structures, they seek to build narratives about specific events and processes, rather than theorizing grandly and establishing causal relationships. Second, humanitarian assistance is presently confronted by a range of major policy questions (such as whether it may prolong conflicts and how best to provide protection to civilians in ongoing conflicts) and evaluation has a key role to play in addressing such questions. (OECD 1999: 12-13)

While it is established that evaluation should no longer be just a question of measuring whether objectives have been met, but also of investigating the ways in which it has had an impact on the wider socio-economic situation, it will be argued that the evaluation reports consulted for this paper do not fully address these questions. One reason for this may be that they have not carried through the recommendations of the guidelines in their evaluation planning. An absence of beneficiary based research makes it effectively impossible to do what the guidelines and manuals suggest. One of the OECD criteria for evaluation is ‘impact’ which:

Looks at the wider effects of the project – social, economic, technical, environmental – on individuals, gender and age-groups, communities, and institutions. Impacts can be immediate and long-range, intended and unintended, positive and negative, macro (sector) and micro (household). Impact studies address the question: what real difference has the activity made to the beneficiaries? How many have been affected?’ (OECD 1999: 22-23)

Similarly, UNHCR refers to:

The current emphasis on short term and long term results rather than outputs. This emphasis more accurately measures the effectiveness and impact of an

activity, and assesses the risk at each step of the result chain. In this way project staff manage not only the intended outputs but also the identified risks associated with the achievement of longer term results. (UNHCR 1998e: 18)

Few of the guidelines go into any detail about how such broad assessments of impact should be conducted. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many practitioners feel constrained from attempting participatory evaluation on the grounds that they are uncertain how to proceed with them. This suggests that there is a relatively limited literature on the subject but this transpires not to be the case. Estrella and Gaventa (1999) list nineteen guides to such participatory processes in their bibliography, and others have been included here. Apthorpe (1999) suggests that a problem lies in the fact that the term 'participation' has been alternately 'mythologised' or 'demonised' in a way which has alienated some. Others indicate that field staff are so over stretched in many cases, that they resist moves to make programming more 'participatory' as 'another unreasonable demand from headquarters.'

An AusAID synthesis study from 1998 refers to the desirability of developing methods for consultation with beneficiary populations; 'Victims' and beneficiaries' understandings and responses must be evaluated much more than is the case in actual practice using consultation methods yet to be devised.' (AusAID 1998: 8) While the emphasis on only 'consultation' may be surprising, it is made clear that what is proposed is a role for evaluation as a negotiation tool for use by actors. Benefits of consulting beneficiaries are multiple and interlinked. 'Consulting beneficiaries is not only a practical and effective way of assessing impact, it also gives a voice to those who may have lost their usual communication channels.' (Hallam 1998: 75) In this context it should be noted that the views of all sections of society, regardless of age or gender, should be included. (UNHCR 1992: 2)

These themes will be re-addressed after a survey of a number of evaluation reports in the next section. One important point remains, however. The prescriptions of the guidelines generally involve a move towards assessment and evaluation as a coherent process. This is linked to a greater involvement by beneficiaries and other stakeholders both in terms of methodology and substantive content. In an important sense, 'The process is the product.' (UNDP 1997) Participatory evaluation represents a 'process of negotiation and mediation' (Interview, Koos Neefjes, 11.4.00), which involves not only including beneficiaries as sources of information, but also defining entirely new roles for them.

It has been proposed that another advantage of this approach may lie in the provision of a forum within which other relevant issues might be raised. One UNHCR staff member, for example, suggested that such a process might also be used to facilitate discussion of gender issues in specific contexts. (Interview, Joyce Mends-Cole, 17.4.00)

Finally, not only do we have to broaden our sense of what evaluation is or could be, we also have to have a more flexible understanding of the contexts in which they take place. Bakewell, for example, calls for evaluations of humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies to look beyond the 'beneficiaries' and to investigate the wider context of 'normality'.

Neglecting the lifeworlds of the local people will make it impossible to understand the process by which external interventions are mediated at the local level to give particular outcomes, and valuable lessons which could help alleviate suffering will be lost. (Bakewell 1999: 101)

### **Is the participatory message getting through?**

As the previous section shows, the ideal of participatory or beneficiary based evaluation methods has gained some currency in institutional guidelines and manuals. Based on a sample of evaluation reports and interviews with relevant individuals, this section considers whether beneficiary based methods are actually being employed by evaluators and organizations. Are the views of beneficiaries being sought by evaluation teams and how do they represent them?

In a review of around 250 evaluation reports in the ALNAP database, Apthorpe and Atkinson found that 'only a few of these evaluations comment on issues of consultation, and few are themselves participatory.' (Apthorpe and Atkinson 1999: 8) Also in this vein, Hallam quotes Kruse et al (1997) as saying that there is a 'wide gap between theory and practice: while almost all NGOs speak of the importance of participation, there is a paucity of evidence of participation in NGO evaluations.' (Hallam 1998: 76)

On the evidence of the range of reports considered for this paper, it seems that beneficiary based methods are not being used systematically in humanitarian assistance evaluations. It may be that these kinds of methods are being used in some cases and to some extent, but the evidence for this is largely anecdotal and does not translate into the resulting documents. It seems that when some degree of informal, opportunistic consultation is used, this is on the basis of personal interest and the availability of time to conduct interviews. This may well contribute to the overall effectiveness and interest of a subsequent report, but without proper documentation, the qualitative methods which are likely to have been used are liable to be condemned as 'unscientific,' 'impressionistic' or 'subjective'.

Terms of Reference and reports rarely prescribe or document any data collection methods, research tools and approaches which have been used. For example, Colin Kirk from DFID suggests that the Evaluation Department there does not generally define research methods in advance with evaluators. (Interview, 31.3.00) DFID reports usually contain little description of methods used, although their recent preference for thematic studies is apparently exerting more pressure to provide methodological process.

There is an awareness within the organization that their efforts have not been adequate in this respect and DFID has already begun a significant process of exploring the possible uses of new participatory approaches. (INTRAC 1999, DFID 2000) Similarly, in the NGO sector, a representative of Save the Children Fund indicated that there is no systematic approach in this area although work on the issue, including work on developing indicators, which show the presence of beneficiary voices, is ongoing:

Our child rights ideology should lead to participation in monitoring and evaluation, planning and assessment and in validating the findings of review and research. The extent to which this happens is variable and depends on

who is involved, the age range of beneficiary children and individual study TORs. (Personal communication, M. Bailey, SCF)

It is therefore interesting to note that in a synthesis study of DFID evaluations, Borton and Macrae describe efforts by evaluators to interview members of the affected population as 'inadequate' (1997: 2) and indicate that this was probably significant for the fact that few of the 28 evaluations were able to address the degree of coverage of assistance.

The general absence of any kind of methodological description in evaluation reports contradicts the recommendation of the OECD that the terms of reference should 'describe the methods to be used during the evaluation.' (OECD 1991: 9) This complaint is repeated by Lindahl in a paper on his experience of an evaluation of SIDA work in Cambodia, where he bemoans the fact that the lack of an explicit methodology caused difficulties between team members and limited the evaluation as a whole. (1998: 7)

The terms of reference for the February 2000 EPAU evaluation report on Kosovo makes some reference to methods to be used, namely:

To conduct the evaluation, key documents will be reviewed and in-depth discussions will be held with UNHCR staff and representatives of other interested parties, including governments, UN agencies, operational NGOs, human rights organizations, the media and the academic world. During field visits, *the views of refugees and former refugees will be solicited.* (Emphasis added). (UNHCR 2000: 129)

In the main body of the report, passing reference is made to the fact that refugees were among the 'persons interviewed'. (2000: 2) But no description is made of data collection methods. Yet again, in one of the much lauded series of evaluation reports produced during the evaluation of DANIDA's Humanitarian Assistance work 1992-98, there is little or no mention of field research methodologies. In an impressively long list of people interviewed for the Sudan report, for example, only five beneficiaries are listed as having been interviewed, despite the fact that the evaluators say that they used Hallam's book, which exhorts evaluators to listen to beneficiary voices, to interpret their terms of reference. This particular study was conducted by the ODI, by a group of people who are more aware than many of the advantages inherent in participatory approaches. They were seriously constrained by logistical difficulties, which experience demonstrates one of the problems faced by would be participatory evaluators in the field.

Despite criticizing the absence of beneficiary community participation in rehabilitation activities in the Great Lakes Region (UNHCR 1999: 6-7), the UNHCR report of the 1999 review of this work itself appears not to have included beneficiary perspectives. In a single paragraph on the scope of the review, the report states:

During the visits, extensive discussions were held with the staff of UNHCR and other United Nations agencies, officials from the host and donor governments and the personnel of non-governmental agencies. Additional

input to the final report was carried out by staff currently serving in the field.  
(1999: 1)

Evidence that beneficiary voices has been heard is notable by its absence. The same is true for numerous other reports, which do not indicate that refugees or other beneficiaries have been consulted or invited to participate (e.g. UNHCR 1988, 1994, 1995, 1996b, 1997b, 1998b). Other reports on the other hand indicate, albeit summarily, that beneficiaries were interviewed, demonstrating that there has not been consistency over the years in this respect. (e.g. UNHCR 1991a, 1991b, 1996a, 1997a, 1998a 1998c, 2000) The inference is that the participation of refugees in UNHCR studies has relied on a number of changing criteria such as the subject matter of the report, the perspective of the evaluation teams, questions of access and timing and so forth. Similarly, in a series of evaluation reports from the mid 1990s, WFP included virtually no description of methods used, with an occasional glancing reference to 'beneficiaries interviewed.' (Sept 1994: 10, also March 1994, March 1995)

Some reports do not describe data collection and other research methods but still refer to beneficiary views. One assessment mission relating to relief provided to Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea (Hedley 1996), for example, refers in passing to a refugee survey (1996: 13), as well as to the opinions of the refugees with reference to food (1996: 7) and health service (1996: 9) provision. Although the inclusion of refugee voices is to be desired, when views are not disaggregated and specific sources of information are not provided, representations must be treated with caution.

The author of a study which was specifically geared towards looking at the extent to which participatory mechanisms were employed by agencies working in the 1998 famine in Southern Sudan, states:

Another major limitation was inability to contact beneficiaries due to time and logistical constraints. Ideally, it would have been helpful to talk to both people who received assistance from the NGOs as well as the various committees, women's groups, "gol" leaders, chiefs and SRRA officials that the agencies were dealing with. (Ntata 1999: 7)

The desire to be consultative, or better still participatory, is a matter for careful planning and documentation. As we have seen, half-hearted attempts, or those which are not fully transparent, can breed more problems for those attempting to win credibility for the strategy. Following on from this, there is a major question about the extent to which it is feasible to include beneficiary views in the evaluation of programmes which have failed to include these during planning, implementing and monitoring stages. Not only does this imply a lack of baseline data for evaluators to use, an important absence which is often noted, but also raises questions about how much assistance providers know about the affected populations with whom they work.

The absence of information about the nature and structure of affected populations on the part of assistance providers inevitably makes decisions about the kind of assistance required, and the way in which this should be delivered, extremely difficult to make and can be the cause of major tensions within the beneficiary population. (Borton et al 1996, Apthorpe et al 1996) Borton and Macrae cite Karim et al (1996) who complain that

while donors demand such relevant information, they rarely provide the kind of support which would be required to gather it. (Borton and Macrae 1997: 52)

Some NGOs have been proactive in this respect, recruiting social researchers to spend significant periods of time in field situations in order to generate learning about the populations with whom they were working. SCF employed a social anthropologist in Southern Sudan for 12 months, while Oxfam initiated an action research team in Ikafe in Northern Uganda. In both cases, extremely useful knowledge was acquired. (Harrigan 1998, Payne 1998) There seems little doubt but that there is significant advantage to be derived from linking participatory evaluation processes with a better understanding of the socio-economic profile of the beneficiary population, and with a greater degree of beneficiary involvement throughout the project cycle. A recent Oxfam review assessing the impact of their food security work calls explicitly for more work on understanding the 'ambitions of the beneficiaries.' (Oxfam 2000: 87)

There is clearly a relationship between the socio-economic and other information which agencies have about the populations whom they assist, and participatory evaluation processes. The kind of information which is sought in the latter, practically depends on the existence of the former. In a sense, if the programming is not already participatory, an evaluation which tries to be, may face difficulties. As Niels Harild commented (Interview, 18.4.00), UNHCR knows too little about the profiles of the groups of people they assist.

More understanding of their worldviews and the strategies which they use themselves to survive in difficult circumstances could only help practitioners in their own efforts to help. This is precisely the kind of information gathered by the SCF anthropologist in Sudan, and his work on local understandings of vulnerability, and social support systems, demonstrated amongst other things how many modes of misunderstanding had previously existed between assistance providers and beneficiaries on a range of levels. As will be discussed later, however, it is far from clear that the use of anthropological research methods alone is participatory, however much 'social learning' (Apthorpe and Atkinson 1999) they generate.

The way in which data was collected does come through in some reports and to some extent. For example, the evaluation of the IPSEER programme in Northern Uganda (1996) describes some of the research methods used and associated risks, while the report resulting from the Oxfam Ikafe review in 1996 represents in detail the process of data collection, in recognition of the fact that this was crucial for review results. Appendix II of the report describes the process of the 'participatory review', documents the review programme and discusses methodological lessons learned. In some cases, evaluators have also subsequently produced papers discussing methodologies and experiences (Neefjes 1999 on the Ikafe experience; Ward 1995 on the advantages of using qualitative research methods).

Such papers, while fascinating, demonstrate the uniqueness of each case, and indicate the difficulty of transposing lessons learned in any degree of detail between programmes. Examples from development are more readily available. Estrella and Gaventa (1999) base their analysis of PM&E on twenty case studies from development, for which they indicate the primary functions, participants and methods used. In his 1999 Oxfam publication on impact assessment, Chris Roche adopts a similar approach,

although he also includes a chapter which discusses the particular methodological and ethical requirements of such work in emergency situations. As he points out:

Even if the opportunities for the full involvement of local people may be limited due to the political and safety situation – a better understanding of their situation and constraints can provide important feedback for project design and management ... Given the fact that key groups are consistently not involved in programme design and implementation – particularly women, older people, and children – it is even more crucial that critical attention is paid to their involvement in impact assessment processes. (Roche 1999: 181)

This position contradicts the views of purists who feel that without a consistent and comprehensive participatory approach throughout programming, there is no value whatever in introducing such approaches at an evaluative or impact assessment stage.

The multi-disciplinary Rwanda evaluation team included two anthropologists and 140 beneficiaries were interviewed. (1996: i) In the report (JEFF 1996), the evaluators indicated that they were ‘struck by the very limited attempts to obtain the views of beneficiaries on the assistance they were being provided with.’ (1996: vi) The report is unusual in describing the research methods employed. (1996: 1.2.9-21) It goes even further in explicitly describing efforts made to take account of beneficiary views for the study, as well as considering the extent to which beneficiaries’ perspectives were considered during the provision of assistance. It found that:

Although channels of communication do exist between refugees and agency personnel, the work of the anthropologists has demonstrated clearly that, in general, beneficiary views have had almost no impact on programme design and implementation. Indeed, refugees are regarded by some foreign aid workers almost as the ‘opposition’, there to cheat at registrations and food distributions and to thwart agency attempts to efficiently and equitably organize their existence. (JEFF 1996: 7.4.421)

Qualitative research in this case relied heavily, and it would seem relatively successfully, on anthropological methods. The scale of this evaluation might have made it difficult for the process to have been more participatory in the ways discussed in the following section.

One of the issues raised by the preceding account is that with so little emphasis on canvassing and representing beneficiary views at all in the evaluation literature, hopes of finding details of the views of disaggregated beneficiary populations is slim indeed. Although it is evident that emergency assistance programmes will not be experienced and perceived identically by different sections of a beneficiary population, little account seems to have been paid to this by evaluations to date. What, then, prevents beneficiary based methods being used more comprehensively than they are in humanitarian assistance and refugee situations? At the ALNAP meeting in November 1998, the reasons for the lack of participation by affected populations was recorded as follows:

It is regarded as time-consuming in time-pressured contexts and culture, threatens agency control, is difficult to do in conflict situations anyway, [with what guidance is available having often] been developed in relation to

development programmes in stable contexts, [and as a rule is not required by] donors [and implementing agencies] who remain preoccupied by upward accountability. (ALNAP 1998)

Numerous other explanations have also been offered: that host governments are hostile to such approaches, that informants might be put at risk in situations of political tension or conflict, that beneficiary populations cannot be trusted to answer honestly for fear of losing assistance, that methodological know-how is missing, that no baseline data exists against which to measure change and that the obstacles represented by logistical constraints are too great to overcome for the sake of beneficiary involvement in evaluation processes.

The political nature of participatory evaluation should not be overlooked in this context. As Jo Boyden of the Refugee Studies Centre points out, the security and political context can place real constraints on these kinds of processes. (Personal communication) In some emergency situations, organizations have a monopoly on action and are not obliged to assess their own impact in the short term due to a lack of available alternatives. In addition, agencies can be wary of beginning a process that holds risks for them as for the beneficiaries themselves. Participatory work of any kind is by definition not standardizable and this can make it unattractive to agencies, particularly when their 'normal' operating systems are centralized and 'top down.'

Commenting on his experiences on the team that conducted the system wide evaluation of the international response to the genocide in Rwanda – which some see as having precipitated interest in the evaluation of humanitarian work – John Borton noted the following constraints. In the first instance, it proved difficult to research events which had taken place some time previously as beneficiary recall was generally too hazy to make retrospective assessments. The agencies being evaluated had generally had a very poor understanding of the refugee societies' before their flight. Finally, the refugees consulted had an extremely undifferentiated view of the assistance providing agencies and often talked generally about 'La Croix Rouge' rather than distinguishing one organization from another. (Interview, John Borton, 20.3.00)

Peter Giesen (MSF Holland) was quite candid about the attitude of many colleagues that there is little room for beneficiary participation in their programming, on the grounds that emergencies have to be managed in a top down manner in order to save lives in the critical early stages. As he pointed out, however, in practice a large portion of their work is carried out after this first stage, and there is a significant need to incorporate beneficiaries in all stages from the initial identification of problems to evaluation processes. (Personal communication)

In view of demands for the assessment of impact of programmes rather than narrow judgements about the achievement of satisfactory outputs, the absence of a close relationship between monitoring and evaluation processes undoubtedly represents a serious obstacle. As Lindahl points out,

It is a mistake by a donor agency to load an evaluation with too many demands including comprehensive assessments of impact, and efficiency and effectiveness, unless there has been prior demand on the implementing agencies for impact monitoring, benchmark studies, etc. (1998: 9)

While Lindahl is concerned with a SIDA evaluation, his general point is true for any impact assessment exercise and should be read as an injunction to carry out such monitoring rather than as an excuse not to carry out comprehensive impact assessments. A related problem raised by David Turton of the Refugee Studies Centre, relates to the extent to which donors, despite their protestations to the contrary, are willing to accept as definitive the results of qualitative social research such as anthropological work with beneficiaries. He commented that he had found that in some cases, complaints were leveled at researchers to the effect that their work was taking too long, was based on too small a sample and so on, demonstrating little understanding of the nature of the research being conducted.

In the face of all these obstacles, are there grounds for believing that assistance providers really want to know what beneficiaries think? The answer will almost certainly be 'yes' if the beneficiaries' sanction their approaches, even if they want some changes made to detail. It is arguable whether the same would be true where beneficiaries disagree in principle with what the organizations are doing. Organizations have vested interests in their programmes; donor approval, institutional control, policy and so forth. It is worth bearing in mind that not all commentators are sanguine. As David Keen points out, 'it is not at all clear that governmental donors will find it in their interests to empower the world's most vulnerable groups.' (Keen, forthcoming: 12)

Apthorpe and Atkinson note that despite the reservations expressed by members of the ALNAP group cited above, 'agencies seemed generally keen to develop themselves in this respect, particularly in view of a growing focus on the rights based approach.' (1999: 10) There also does seem to be significant interest in social learning and the development of methods for greater beneficiary involvement in evaluation, as well as the other stages of programme cycles within the humanitarian assistance regime.

This is evidenced by strong support for a proposed 'global study' on the subject at the April 2000 ALNAP meeting. In 1999, ActionAid and the Institute of Development Studies also held a workshop in Nairobi on Participatory Approaches in Emergencies. Other related initiatives are those progressing on standards such as the Sphere Project and the Humanitarian Ombudsman project although these have varying relevance for evaluation work in particular. The Sphere team, for example, have shown themselves to be reluctant to incorporate work on standards for evaluation. Nevertheless, their 'Guidance Notes' (e.g. Sphere 2000:26) touch on evaluation of the sectors for which they have drawn up standards and emphasize that 'when evaluations are carried out it is important that the techniques and resources used are consistent with the scale and nature of the programme, and that the report describes the methodology employed and the processes followed in reaching conclusions.' (Sphere 2000: 27-28)

### **Moving closer to participatory evaluations**

There is little fundamental debate amongst donors, international agencies and implementers over what criteria are suitable for the evaluation of humanitarian assistance. 'The standard OECD/DAC evaluation criteria of efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability and relevance are broadly appropriate for humanitarian assistance programmes.' (OECD 1999: 22-23) In their Evaluation Synthesis of Emergency Aid for DFID in 1997, Borton and Macrae adapt these to appropriateness, cost-effectiveness,

impact, coverage, coherence and connectedness ‘because they were considered to be more pertinent to the objectives of humanitarian aid programmes than the five OECD criteria.’ (Borton and Macrae 1997: 18) UNHCR proposes that effectiveness, efficiency, economy, impact, relevance and unanticipated consequences are likely to be of interest. (UNHCR 1998d)

There appears to have been no discussion of the fact that beneficiaries have not themselves had a role in defining criteria, although their participation at the field level in defining indicators of success is more of an issue. Whether this last takes place during the early stages of an evaluation is part of a wider question about whether the process seeks merely to consult them, or whether their active participation is invited. The second implies their direct involvement throughout the decision making, data collection and analysis processes of the evaluation in a way which devolves power to them and invites them to take on the management of some aspects of their own situation.

ActionAid’s research on participatory impact assessment, operated on the basis that ‘it is the ‘customers’ or ‘beneficiaries’ of any intervention who have the most interest in its ‘impact’ and are therefore in a strong position to define their own indicators by which changes brought about by these interventions can be assessed.’(ActionAid 1998: 5) This is a common view amongst those who feel that beneficiaries should effectively control evaluative work, but is rarely seen at this stage in the field of humanitarian assistance.

### **Participatory evaluation as process**

The Institute for Development Studies at Sussex University, one of the key players in work on participation in the UK, has this to say in a 1998 Policy Briefing:

At the heart of PM&E ... are four broad principles:

- ‘Participation’ - which means opening up the design of the process to include those most directly affected, and agreeing to analyze data together;
- The inclusiveness of PM&E requires ‘negotiation’ to reach agreement about what will be monitored or evaluated, how and when data will be collected and analysed, what the data actually means, and how findings will be shared, and action taken;
- This leads to ‘learning’ which becomes the basis for subsequent improvement and corrective action;
- Since the number, role, and skills of stakeholders, the external environment, and other factors change over time, ‘flexibility’ is essential.

The desirability of many of these characteristics is also asserted by proponents of a group of American approaches including ‘Fourth Generation Evaluation’. (Guba and Yvonne 1989) Here evaluation should no longer be ‘characterizable as measurement-oriented, description-oriented, and judgement -oriented’ (1989: 8), the key dynamic is negotiation and it is understood that what is contested are alternative visions of the world:

Evaluation outcomes are not descriptions of the ‘way things really are’... but instead represent meaningful constructions that individual actors or groups of actors form to ‘make sense’ of the situations in which they find themselves. The findings are not ‘facts’ in some ultimate sense but are, instead, literally created through an interactive process which involves all stakeholders. These constructions are shaped by the values of the constructors (actors), and ‘linked to the particular physical, psychological, social and cultural contexts within which they are formed and to which they refer.’ (Guba and Yvonne 1989: 8)

According to Fetterman, this leaves the evaluator as predominantly a collaborator and facilitator; ‘empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination’ (1996: 4), with the process functioning as a mode of self evaluation, with control vested in the participants rather than in the hands of the evaluator. It is conceived as a learning process for all involved. Similarly, for Michael Quinn Patton,

Utilization-focused evaluation is inherently participatory and collaborative in actively involving primary users in all aspects of evaluation logic and processes... participation and collaboration can lead to an ongoing, longer term commitment to using evaluation logic and building a culture of learning in an organization. (Patton 1997: 100)

Participatory evaluation is most accurately conceived as a process characterized by negotiation and power sharing rather than an event according to these ideologies. ‘Involving all parties concerned gives an opportunity for learning by doing and will strengthen skills and capacities in the recipient countries, an important objective which should also be promoted through training and other support for institutional and management development.’ (OECD 1991: 8) This last quotation from the OECD refers not to beneficiaries in the sense of individuals at the field level, but to local managers and policy makers. In reality, such an approach can only be carried over to the field level if organizations are prepared to relinquish some control, and if they are actually interested in new ways of doing things. Using beneficiary based methods in evaluation activities may be a first step in this direction.

## **Evaluation methods**

The overwhelming consensus in the literature is that participatory evaluations are most successful when they employ a wide range of research methods and data collection tools. (OECD 1999, AusAID 1998, Apthorpe 1999, Roche 1999, Kneefjes 1999) As Estrella and Gaventa note, there are a ‘wide variety of tools and techniques for PM&E’ including ‘PRA and PRA-related tools, audio-visual tools, quantitative tools’ and ‘tools derived from the ‘anthropological’ tradition’ (1999: 32) Roche indicates that even in emergency situations, it is possible to consider using surveys, interviews, workshops and discussions and direct observation, as well as RRA and PRA/PLA tools such as time lines and historical profiles, scoring and ranking, diagrammatic tools, flow charts or mind maps and trend analysis. (Roche 1999: 170-181) Apthorpe and Atkinson point out that:

No one method (or scale, scope or depth) of social learning fits all purposes or situations ... there are always alternatives. These include action-research, social surveys, social anthropological fieldwork, PRAs, panel and focus and other group methods, consultation through representative bodies, policy dialogue and so forth. (Apthorpe and Atkinson 1999: 15)

The aim is to gather as much relevant, high quality data as possible without falling into any of the numerous methodological traps which might undermine the reliability and credibility of the information generated.

Given the relative absence of beneficiary views in current evaluation output documents, any approach that canvasses the views of beneficiaries is to be welcomed. Because the views sought relate to the experience of recipients of aid about their predicaments and the aid and protection which is offered to them, qualitative methods such as those indicated above are more likely to be useful than quantitative ones. For this reason, the OECD proposes the development of a 'narrative history' of a scenario, consisting of a synthesis of versions of events collected from informants with varying perspectives. In many ways this is a recognizable anthropological method and demonstrates that they are not necessarily averse to the use of qualitative data collection techniques.

It details not just what happened and when, but also who was involved, and why, and links significant events ... The narrative history approach is particularly suited to evaluating complex emergencies because it focuses on qualitative as well as quantitative methods; because it allows the evaluator to focus on actions, processes and intentions; and because it highlights the competing agendas of the diverse range of actors. Furthermore, use of the narrative history approach does not preclude the use of more analytical models, such as logical frameworks or cost-effectiveness reviews, to examine specific components of an emergency assistance programme. (OECD 1999 18-19, also quoted in AusAID 1998: 6)

The OECD also note that in emergency situations record keeping is often less than perfect, and suggest that beneficiary interviewees may be able to provide information which is needed by an evaluation team, but not available elsewhere. (OECD 1999: 24) Another commentator suggests that concerns relating to the time taken by participatory work in programme implementation or evaluation is not grounded in experience. His work in Sudan 'found that some of the most important information to programme delivery was generated through one day workshops which involved the widest possible representation of the community.' (Ntata 1999: 33)

Borton is also pragmatic in his approach, asserting that while statistical surveys are unlikely to be successful in emergencies,

The views of a small but reasonably representative sample of the population regarding the appropriateness, effectiveness and timeliness of the relief assistance, the extent to which it supported their own coping and recovery mechanisms and the effectiveness of any targeting methods employed, may be gained simply by talking to a selection of beneficiaries and where relevant, non-beneficiaries in the project area. (Borton 1995: 14)

A warning note is sounded by an SCF publication which admits that, 'Qualitative information is often the most accurate, but quantitative data may be required as evidence for donors that a problem exists.' (Gosling and Edwards, 1995: 134) Keen makes this problem explicit with a dark view that associates what he sees as the donors' demand for hard data and quantitative results in evaluations with their political desire to control beneficiaries. 'Bureaucracies need to respond to measurable problems with measurable results: this demand for 'accountability' (not to beneficiaries but to donors) may encourage the exercise of a number of forms of control.' By obliging refugees to stay in camps, for example, where aid can be conveniently administered, they are 'restricting when they would more usefully be empowering' (Keen, forthcoming: 74)

Beneficiary based evaluation is most usefully conceived as specifically focused social research, aiming not exclusively to ascertain cause and effect relationships, but also to understand the nature of the situation as it is experienced by various social actors within it. Qualitative, and conceivably also anthropological research methods and analysis may be the most productive strategies.

This paper entirely disagrees with the view that 'consultancy is not research, nor research consultancy' (AusAID 1998: 6) as the opposition is unproductive and unnecessary in terms of evaluative work. It is entirely possible to conduct qualitative social research which is geared towards answering policy questions, as well as questions about programmatic effectiveness. Two studies demonstrate this effectively. Harrigan's anthropological work in Southern Sudan was intended from the beginning to feed into SCF's work in the region. He successfully reconciled what have sometimes been seen as the contradictory requirements of applied and academic research by determining:

To try to stress anthropological methods in the collection of data, and then stress relief rather than anthropological agendas in the writing up... the main objective was to seek maximum validity according to local thinking during fieldwork, and maximum relevance and exposure for the writing-up. (Harrigan 1998: 48)

Bakewell's study, which represented research for a PhD, also usefully considered mechanisms of assistance in a mixed refugee and non-refugee area in Zambia. He sees the wider context of assistance provision as crucial to any evaluation of its success or failure; 'evaluation must consider the interface between micro, village level, events and institutions, and macro, international institutions'. (Bakewell 1999: 107) One of his main points is a concern shared by many assistance providers and relates to the extent to which formal assistance interacts with the local coping strategies which are so often referred to, and so infrequently explored:

The focus of the evaluation must be on the lifeworlds of social actors, if we are to understand the processes which are happening and their causes. This is particularly important in emergencies, where the 'victims' are too often assumed to have very limited agency and are subject to external intervention over which they have little or no control. To a large extent this may be true as far as their direct participation in aid programmes is concerned but this often reflects the systems of power and control of programmes rather than the capacity of the 'beneficiaries'. However, they hold the key to understanding the impact of these programmes and building up lessons for

the future. Although their agency may be so limited to be almost undetectable, what little there is will certainly be unnoticed if it is assumed away.’ (Bakewell 1999: 107)

Both writers spent a considerable period of time conducting field research with recipients of aid and those with whom beneficiaries lived. As Harrigan points out, however, simply being there and becoming involved with the communities is inadequate alone for the collection of relevant information:

All the other tools of semi-structured interviews were used including triangulation, optimal ignorance and examining one’s own prejudices. A mixture of disciplined learning and natural osmosis is necessary, as neither one nor the other is adequate alone. (Harrigan 1998: 49)

Advocates of different types of research strategy tend to be evangelical about their preferred methods, and this is perhaps most obvious in relation to PRA enthusiasts. Many of the main research tools of PRA have entered the main stream of social research and under some circumstances, notably when time is very short, can offer an effective mechanism for participatory learning. The focus is on ‘handing over the stick’ (Chambers 1992: 89), which is to say facilitating environments within which communities can achieve insights about their own situations and behaviours which allow them to manage them positively, as well as generating knowledge for the organizations which assist them.

Koos Neefjes, who co-led the Ikafe review process for Oxfam, is enthusiastic about PRA tools, although he recognizes that they must be managed sensitively. His position is that NGOs should be training more staff in PRA techniques as they represent the most realistic way to carry out participatory research and review processes. While PRA techniques are also a favourite of the influential IDS group who have been largely responsible for developing them, other commentators are more wary.

For some, they are a poor substitute for social understanding masquerading as such in a way which blocks the possibility of achieving it. Aphorpe (1999) is sceptical about the methodology as well as about whose interests it really serves. Similarly, Richards sees the need for reform:

The first major task of this new PRA/RRA will be to wean itself from a desire to document – to ‘know things’ in ways capable of sustaining discussion, or filling boxes in consultants’ reports – and move towards interventions in which attention focuses on action as a key component in the establishment of an emancipatory learning environment. (Richards 1995: 16)

Whichever set of beneficiary based research methods is considered appropriate for a given situation, it is important that evaluations are designed in such a way that these are fully integrated into the entire mission. It is not desirable that participatory elements should be ‘added on’ to existing, non beneficiary based evaluation methods. This might send a message that the component was in some way ‘optional’ whereas it should be seen as central to the work. The attitudes and behaviour of the different actors in a humanitarian assistance situation are all critical for the way it plays out. Whatever level of beneficiary consultation or participation is deemed possible in an evaluation,

participatory imperatives will also have an effect on the way the non-beneficiary based component of the evaluation is conducted. Questions which are asked of programme staff, for example, will be conditioned by knowledge generated with beneficiaries and so on.

Related to this, and critically important throughout evaluation field research, is that the various 'stakeholders' to the evaluation should be disaggregated and as many perspectives as possible sought within and beyond the beneficiary population.

'In addition to the decision-makers most directly involved, there is often a long list of persons with an interest in the evaluation such as policy makers, donors, operational partners, organizations with competing interests, beneficiaries and various parts of the host government.' (UNHCR 1998d: para 20) For this paper, it is the category of beneficiaries which is most relevant, but this is not as straightforward as it might seem. The beneficiary population is always itself stratified and great care must be taken to incorporate views from across its spectrum. This involves ensuring that groups that are less powerful within the population are given a voice.

Which categories of people these are will necessarily differ in different contexts. It may be that women, the elderly and children are disenfranchised as is often expected, but other groups may be substituted for these. It is the responsibility of the evaluator to cater for this and to ensure that the evaluation research is not 'hi-jacked' by a single interest group within the population. Participatory evaluation offers the opportunity to understand and negotiate diverse stakeholder perspectives but power differentials between groups can skew results. (Estrella and Gaventa 1999) Furthermore, when people are treated as 'social groups' by evaluation teams, it should be clear that they do in fact function as a group and have not been lumped together for the convenience of managers or evaluators themselves.

Rossi warns that evaluators must thus understand the 'social ecology' (Rossi 1993: 454) of the situations within they work if they are to be able to situate actors. For Johann Pottier, conducting anthropological research in a camp for Rwandan refugees, it was difficult to know who he was talking to in terms of political allegiance. He emphasizes the need to avoid talking only to 'leaders' in politically sensitive situations in particular, as it may be hard to find out how representative their views are and what their authority rests on. He also raises the necessity of understanding the relationships that exist within the beneficiary population, and between them and others. Differences in perspective must be recognized and factored in to any analysis, whether these are within the beneficiary population, or between them and assistance providers. As Pottier writes, 'the question of how to deal with opposed views grounded in different morality systems needs to be addressed if beneficiary surveys are to become fully participative.' (Pottier 1995: 18)

While several commentators deal with the difficulty of deciding exactly who amongst the beneficiary population should be invited to participate in evaluations (e.g. Ntata 1999, Rubin 1995, Pottier 1995), others warn that it would be naive to expect any participant not to act in a political, self interested way. As Bakewell notes, 'aid programmes are not imposed on passive beneficiaries but exist in an arena of social actors with competing interests and strategies.' (1999: 101-2) In addition to ensuring adequate attention to a disaggregated beneficiary population, therefore, it is almost

always also necessary to involve those living with and around beneficiaries. In some cases such people may have been disadvantaged by assistance given to others, and this must be ascertained for the impact of programming to be assessed. (Keen, forthcoming: 59)

Above all, it should be expected that beneficiaries and others function as strategic actors, and may 'strategically omit' to tell assistance providers what they believe would make them withdraw support. 'Miscommunication is interactionally constituted between clients and project proponents' according to this view. (Novellino 2000) This is most obviously the case in relation to livelihood issues. Given the often contested and highly politicized nature of humanitarian emergencies, it is not surprising that 'truth' is a variable commodity and social research has to take this into account in evaluation processes. (OECD 1999: 11) Research methods must include a significant degree of checking and cross checking, the use of 'triangulation' techniques and an awareness that it may never be possible to gain an objective account of events which have taken place in the past.

Furthermore, it will be necessary for evaluators to attempt to be aware of the impact that they, and the evaluation process, are themselves having on the situation. In this context, it is crucial that the research process avoids endangering vulnerable participants by obliging them to speak openly about things they have experienced which might put them at risk. In addition, it is unethical to raise expectations about what a participating community can hope to gain by becoming involved in a participatory evaluation. (Interview, N. Whande, 17.4.00) Schoenhuth warns that participatory approaches are by definition inclined to do this precisely because beneficiaries are not used to being invited to get involved. (Schoenhuth 2000)

## **Conclusion**

By demonstrating themselves to be willing to investigate the prospects for use of beneficiary based methods, UNHCR is both acting courageously and moving towards redressing an imbalance which has been in place for too long. It is clear that there is a difference between listening to beneficiaries and ensuring that their voices are heard in subsequent evaluation reports, and conducting an evaluation that is fully participatory. It probably is the case that the latter can only be achieved when programming has been explicitly participatory, and when adequate monitoring has been conducted throughout. This should not be taken to mean that in the absence of such ideal conditions, which may not yet exist at all in the field of humanitarian assistance, beneficiary based methods should not be introduced. It may be that beginning at the end in this way even functions as an inducement for more participatory work at earlier stages of programming, should these methods prove to be useful.

The type of evaluation to be conducted necessarily depends on the nature of the programme to be evaluated. In a situation where it is unclear to what extent participation has been included as a programmatic principle, the most advisable strategy is to proceed with caution. One should not assume, for example, that either the baseline data exists or that the social structures are in place for a large scale participatory review such as was conducted by Oxfam in Ikafe, to take place.

Ideally, a beneficiary based evaluation process should incorporate many of the features discussed above, including the involvement of as many stakeholders as possible in an enterprise which is conceived and directed as much by programme beneficiaries as by programme staff or an external evaluator. The purpose of this paper has been to prepare the ground for an exploratory participatory evaluation exercise. Because of uncertainty about the extent to which the necessary preliminary data collection and sensitization work will have been conducted, due to a desire to explore possible strategies as widely as possible, and in response to experts who assert that a mixed methodology is most effective, this study proposes a 'jackdaw approach' should be employed as a starting point. This implies that a range of approaches and methodologies will be sampled, with results cross-checked with a view to establishing which have been most useful in the case in point.

Perhaps predictably, as it is written by an anthropologist, this paper concludes that anthropological research methods are the most appropriate starting point for an exploratory beneficiary based evaluation. By aspiring to 'map' and understand the social network represented by the diverse actors in a refugee situation, an anthropological approach can provide an entry point into a complex socio-political environment.

At the heart of such methods is a willingness to engage with interacting groups in whatever mode is considered appropriate, to listen, to become involved as a learning strategy and, ultimately, to mediate between groups who literally and conceptually do not speak the same language. Anthropological work alone, however, is probably more accurately described as consultative than it is participatory. Drawing on other methods referred to above, therefore, it will be necessary to widen the research scope and range by utilizing other research tools mentioned above which have been found to be useful in action and social research.

At a minimum, various types of individual and group interviews should be conducted, as well as other group activities designed to raise the profile of the issues at hand and invite discussion around them. One significant limitation on the process lies in the powerlessness of a field researcher to act directly on the lessons learned during participatory research. This implies a need for the whole hearted commitment of field staff who are in a position to act in this way in the short term, while the conclusions of any report percolate their way through the system.

Much of this represents a compromise. As we have seen above, a genuinely participatory evaluation considers the process to be as important as any subsequent report, both for the lessons which are learned from it and because of the activity and involvement in decision making and analysis on the part of beneficiaries which is implied by it. In the absence of the conditions for this kind of coverage, however, the kind of process which is proposed here promises to be an extremely useful learning experience which may provide the basis for further progress in the direction of participatory evaluation.

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